DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 417 181 SP 037 828

AUTHOR Butler, Judy D.
TITLE The Student Teaching Experience: A Comparative Study.
PUB DATE 1998-02-00
NOTE 16p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Students; Cooperating Teachers; Educational Experience; Elementary Secondary Education; Higher Education; *Nontraditional Students; Preservice Teacher Education; *Student Teacher Attitudes; Student Teachers; *Student Teaching; *Teaching Experience

ABSTRACT

This paper describes a 1996 study that compared the student teaching experiences of a traditional and a nontraditional student to ascertain what differences in their experiences might imply about teacher preparation. The two students kept journals that could be written in at any time of the day. They recorded their impressions of their situation and their reactions to events. They also reflected at the close of each day. The students met with the researcher once a week for discussion. The researcher periodically visited with the cooperating teachers and college supervisor to gain anecdotal evidence. At the end of the semester, the cooperating teachers completed interviews. A list of categories emerged from the conversations and journals, including paranoia about succeeding (the unrealistic fear of failure), perception of differing relationships with cooperating teachers and staff, the adaptation from student to teacher, and the relationship to the content. Results indicated that there were marginal differences between the two. The nontraditional student had an easier time establishing relationships with the cooperating teacher and other school faculty. Cooperating teachers agreed that they more easily built relationships with student teachers who were closer to their age. The traditional student was more confident about obtaining certification. Both students conveyed exhaustion and amazement with how their cooperating teachers kept up with so much information. (SM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 417 181

The Student Teaching Experience: A Comparative Study

Abstract

This paper addresses the results of a study comparing the student teaching experiences of a traditional and non-traditional student to ascertain what differences in the experiences might imply about teacher preparation. Results indicate that there are marginal differences. It suggests that there are further areas to study, such as the formation of alternative paths to licensure, especially for the nontraditional student.

Judy D. Butler, Ed.D.
State University of West Georgia
Assistant Professor of Middle Grades/Secondary Education
770-836-6560 (office)
770-836-4643 (fax)
jdbutler@westga.edu

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

J. Butler

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

SP037838

The Student Teaching Experience: A Comparative Study

As we enter an era when individuals live longer, work longer, and may change professions multiple times, it is reasonable to conclude that people who are at middle age and making such changes may be entering the field of education. They do so with experiences and skills gained through, perhaps, over 25 years of working, raising families, participating in communities, and living productively. Although alternative certification may be an option, a large number of these people are returning to a college, or university, to receive preparation and acquire their initial certification to teach. The growing presence of non-traditional (over age 30) students is altering the complexion of teacher education programs (Bray, 1995).

As teacher educators, we benefit from evaluating, assessing, and rethinking our teacher preparation programs. Perhaps the most valuable part of such is the student teaching, or internship, experience. A dynamic event in the lives of those preparing to teach, it deserves our diligent scrutiny. In addition, there is concern that colleges are not doing an adequate job with non-traditional students (Evangelauf, 1990; Palmer, 1985). Because of their age and life experiences, they add new dimensions to the study of the pre-service teacher. This study involved the examination of two student teachers in the spring semester of 1996, one non-traditional student and one traditional.

Background

While completing my doctorate (1993-1995), I supervised social studies students teachers during four semesters. Three of those semesters I worked with several non-traditional students. In the semester prior to this study, I coordinated the student teaching experience for six non-traditional social studies student teachers. Although their experiences were certainly different from the younger students, I found it difficult to label the ways in which their work in methods courses and experiences in the classroom of public schools were different from the traditional students in their cohort, with the exception of one factor. They all seemed paranoid about "passing."

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

I remember, in particular, a former professional basketball player and a former bank executive, both of whom had done motivational speaking, coaching, and volunteer work in schools, and both of whom had great charisma and personal confidence. Both men will be great additions to the teaching profession. However, they became nervous when I visited them to observe. Their conversations with me frequently included phrases like, "whatever it takes to get certified", or "Will I pass?"

These non-traditional students were competent and no matter how much I sought to assure them they were doing admirably, they remained apprehensive about their successful completion of the student teacher experience. What causes this needless paranoia? Why do they lack the confidence they should have? Why the unusual fear of failure? What can teacher educators do to capitalize on the tremendous potential in many of our non-traditional students and abrogate the fears and frustrations these students experience in their preparation programs?

Review of Literature

Research into non-traditional students' experiences in higher education is prolific and ongoing. The majority of it deals with recruitment, retention, and special circumstances, e.g., the need for weekend classes, babysitting services, alternative registration (e.g., Hensel, 1991). Research into the student teaching experience is also prolific and ongoing. Most of it deals, however, with aggregate groups. That is, cohorts within age groups, e.g., elementary, secondary, or subject specific research, e.g., math student teachers. There are studies that are ethnographic, e.g., how student teachers use technology or questioning skills.

Investigating a non-traditional student's student teaching experience, then, is fertile ground. Meloy (1992) surveyed 35 cooperating teachers from nine schools to ascertain their opinions about non-traditional student teachers. The results indicated that nearly half of the cooperating teachers believed that age and gender made a difference in how they regarded their student teachers. If they regarded the non-traditional students differently, then one might postulate that the experience for

that non-traditional student teacher is different from the similar experience of the traditional student teacher.

Bray (1995) investigator non-traditional (over 25 years of age) student teachers who were preparing to teach elementary school. In this study, which compared traditional and non-traditional student teachers, Bray ascertained that there was a significant difference concerning self and task concerns. Other findings included a marked difference in their relationship between student teachers and their supervising teachers, the need for a management course, and earlier, more extensive field experiences.

There are other areas of research that are applicable to this study. Much of the work that has been done on adult learning, for example, is pertinent, e.g., work of Morris Keeton. Keeton (1984) advocates the recognition and assessment of prior experiential learning as a valid means by which students are enabled to gain credits for a college degree. He also supports an andragological approach to adult learning over the more traditionally accepted pedagogical approach. That is, instead of learners being dependent upon a teacher to impart knowledge, i.e., pedagogy, andragogy insists that teachers act as facilitators for self-directed learners.

Information about continuing education and alternative, or non-traditional, education (e.g., Chudwin & Durrant, 1981) is relative. Such provide a compilation of data about many non-traditional students from which teacher educators may draw insight that informs their relationships with non-traditional students.

Powers and Redding (1995) were simply interested in the perceptions of post-secondary education and purposed to discover if that perception differed between traditional and non-traditional students. Although this study is not specifically germane to student teaching, its conclusions, i.e., that there is not a significant difference between traditional and non-traditional students' perceptions, will become applicable in the discussion of this project.

An unpublished article by Shankar (1994) provides a good framework for the results of my

study. Her study investigated the communication and learning problems faced by non-traditional students. It involved 10 case studies conducted at two midwestern universities. The results indicated that college curriculums were designed for the traditional student and often did not give ample consideration to the needs of non-traditional students. Non-traditional students did not feel that assignments in their courses were designed with their needs in mind. Third, she found that non-traditional students often feel socially isolated because of their age and because they often commute to campus. Sometimes the classroom structure dependent on sophisticated equipment, e.g., computers, present problems for the reentry level student. Some non-traditional students would prefer to have more control of the direction of their studies. Some non-traditional students find faculty difficult to interact with because their philosophy is so geared to the traditional student. This study suggests, then, that modifications in the educational system are called for. In particular, faculty advisors, support groups, and mentoring systems specifically designed for the non-traditional student could prove helpful.

Question

The question for this study, then, becomes: Is there a significant difference between the experiences as student teachers of a non-traditional student and a traditional student? Of interest are the relationships each has with students, cooperating teachers, peers, supervisors, coordinator, and administrative personnel. In addition, the participants might discuss preparation time, classroom management issues, personal expectations and their level of confidence at various periods or events during the student teaching experience.

This leads to a more intriguing questions, i.e., If it is different, in what ways? Should it be different? Can it be different? Can it be a rewarding experience for everyone concerned, e.g., processor, cooperating teachers, and the student cohort? And, for further study, how is it different for aggregate groups, e.g., ex-military, retirees entering new career?

Subjects

The two students involved were social studies student teachers in the spring, 1996, semester. One was 21(Sara) and the other 45 (John). They both had solid academic records and show great potential as teachers. They were assigned to the same high school for their student teaching experience. As coordinator of their student teaching experience, teacher of the methods class they completed prior to going into a high school, and as their professor in a previous semester, I observed them to be typical of the student teacher population.

Procedure

Data was collected in three ways. The two students involved were asked to keep journals that could be written in at any time during the day. They were asked to record their impressions of their situation, as well as their reactions to events. They could include notes to themselves about what they needed to do, or remember, i.e., rearrange room on the day they teach to mitigate potential discipline problems. They were also asked to reflect at the close of each day. Secondly, the two students were asked to meet with the researcher once a week for discussion. Those conferences were audio taped and I kept written notes.

In addition, I visited periodically with the cooperating teachers and the college supervisor involved to gain impressions, or anecdotal evidence. At the end of the semester, I interviewed both cooperating teachers at length (over an hour) and that was audio taped.

I developed a list of categories, or themes, that seemed to emerge from the conversations, and the journals of the students. These were also influenced by my prior experiences with both traditional and non-traditional students. They included such things as, paranoia about succeeding, or the unrealistic fear of failure, as well as perception of differing relationships with cooperating teachers and staff in the cooperating schools and students, the adaption from student to teacher, and the relationship to the content.

At the end of the semester, four non-traditional students were invited to join me for supper,

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

and during the time we shared, I focused their attention on these categories with questions and probes for anecdotes from their student teaching experience specifically, and their teacher education program more broadly.

Analysis

Journals were read and coded. In the first reading, I simply looked for similarities and differences between the journal of the non-traditional student and the traditional student. During a second reading, I began to calculate themes, or categories. I listened to the audio tapes and made notes. I reviewed the notes I had taken during the semester and made appropriate notations..

Results

The variables that emerged included relationships to students, colleagues, and the various supervisors, including the cooperating teacher, the college supervisor, and the college coordinator. Time management, both in and out of school, was an important issue. A general frustration with "the system," or bureaucracy, was also a common theme. The prospects for the future popped up in the journals as an ever-present concern. Reactions to their preparation were subtle, probably because they knew I would be reading what they wrote. References to various aspects of their preparation, or lack of sufficient preparation, were implied in numerous ways.

Similarities

Both students in my study experienced fatigue. There just seemed to not be enough hours in the day. As the non-traditional student put it in his journal on the day before spring break began, "Ahhhhhhhhhhh! Spring Break! There is a God!" or as the traditional student wrote, " THANK GOD FOR SPRING BREAK!" When I asked them what they intended to do during spring break, they answered in chorus, "Sleep!" While there is nothing unique about this phenomena, it does perhaps provide cause to consider altering the student teaching assignment. Perhaps a day or two "down time" would be helpful, when students return to campus for seminars and are out of the high school classroom.

A common complaint from my students has been that too much was expected of them and trying to get it all done keeps them from doing the best they can during the teaching time. While all of us who teach resonate with this feeling, it is important for us to recognize that student teachers sometimes become "slaves" to the system. The perception of what is appropriate is vague, therefore, they hesitate to say "no" lest it affect their grade.

A disdain for "the system" is a common theme. It includes frustrations with the university in setting up interviews and completing paper work. But more importantly, it includes that frustration so many educators have with too much paper work and too many "secretarial" duties. In the case of this study, it also involved a much larger system, in that many of these teachers' students were in trouble with the law, had suffered abuse, or lived in horrifying socio-economic conditions. Or, as Sara wrote, "It was frustrating to see it take so long for the system to work for kids."

On the very first day, Sara wrote, "The most difficult part of teaching will be the administrative stuff." John wrote, just two days into the experience, "Recordkeeping is going to present a problem to yours truly." Schools vary so much in this regard that it is difficult to prepare students. Even though these two had observed in a school once a week during the preceding semester, the paper work quickly overwhelmed them.

One of Sara's students did not have any homework or textbooks, because the police had removed her from her parents home in the middle of the night due to the abuse she was receiving. The judge put a restraining order on the mother so that the student could not go near her, which meant, among other things, that she could not go home. While finding her replacement materials was relatively easy, the notebook, which the student was required to keep, with all of her work in it, was inaccessible. The student was failing because everything to be graded was in the missing notebook. The missing notebook was a mere symptom of the problem. The student really wanted to succeed, but getting the case worker, the foster family, the police, and the school officials to

cooperate for the child's best interest was an impossible task. Sara agonized over this one.

One of John's students (David) pushed his button one time too many when he came to class with headsets (with tape recorder attached) on. He mocked John and John lost his temper and used some foul language. The cooperating teacher took the student (David) to the counselor's office. John thought his career was over and it had not even begun. In a few minutes, David came back and said, "I don't want to make you mad. You are the only reason I come to class and I want to keep coming back." They talked about it, shook hands, and departed.

A week later, David was caught in a computer lab apparently looking for batteries for his Walkman. The recorder was confiscated and he was sent home. He returned and put on a real show in the office which included a lot of profanity and concluded with his assault of the principal. The police were called. When they searched David, they found in his pocket a 13-inch butterfly knife. In the other pocket was a crack pipe. David fought the policeman. He was cuffed. He threatened the principal. Police took him to juvenile hall. Usually young people are kept a while to let them cool off, then released on their own recognizance. Four days later, when John called to check on him, David was still locked up. Felony possession. Felony threat. He was gone from school -- permanently. John was demoralized. He wrote, "I walk quietly and I no longer strut."

There are moments of reward, as well. John played basketball in the annual faculty-student game. Sara got to judge at Geography Bee. Both became involved in the planning of a special observance called, "A Day Without Violence."

Differences

The differences center around five concepts: relationship with content, relationship with teachers in the cooperating school, relationships with students, concern for students, apprehension about the future.

John not only is a history buff, he had the advantage of age. He had lived through a lot of the time his students were discussing. He reads voraciously, especially biographies. There is not

one mention in his journal of "cramming" or researching. Sara, on the other hand, is very aware of how little she knows. She was an excellent student and very prepared, as far as credits accumulated, but her journal entries express her novice state. At one point, she says, "I am going to be spending all of the weekend in the library." At another time she wrote, "... I had to learn the entire Middle East in one weekend."

The relationship with other teachers is an area worth noting, because those relationships often are key determiners to the experience of the student teacher. While Sara had a friendly and instant affinity for her cooperating teacher, that teacher had been a good friend of Sara's mother when the two of them were young teachers. Sara was like a daughter to her. While Sara readily admits her admiration for her teacher, the age difference established the backdrop for the relationship from the very beginning.

On the other hand, John's cooperating teacher was about his age. Their relationship became adversarial and I am not certain why. She was "seasoned" and he was excited about his chosen field. When he wanted to try something new, she quickly said it would not work. It was her way or no way. John rebelled against that, was frustrated by it, but finally acquiesced in order to "pass." He became very docile and obedient towards the end of the experience. "Whatever is takes," became his mantra.

John was mistaken for a substitute teacher a number of times. In the focus group, the other non-traditional student teachers reported the same thing. They were immediately recognized as staff, while the traditional student teachers were acknowledged by everyone as just that, i.e., student teachers. The other non-traditional student teachers reported good relationships with there cooperating teacher, that is, they felt a kinship with them. all reported that they were easily included, while the traditional students often felt like slaves -- degraded, devalued, used.

The relationship with students, as one might expect, was different as well. John saw himself in a paternal role. Sara saw that she was going to have to "earn" the respect of the

students. On the very first day, she wrote in her journal, "The kids in second period think I look exactly like a cheerleader at the school."

Sara easily gets frustrated with students as we can see in these remarks, "They don't meet expectations. I'm discouraged because kids in the honors class don't know... They are so disrespectful, disregarding authority, obnoxious. I'm not exactly sure how I'm going to handle getting disruptive kids out of class while trying to stay on task. My goal is to make 3rd period want to succeed." She is also preoccupied with staying "in control."

John, on the other hand, wants to save the world. He was concerned about the students who were in trouble. He was interested in being involved with students outside of class. He wanted to transform the students' performance by turning them on to using Hyperstudio. He attended ball games. He became very upset by the talk in the faculty lounge where teachers verbally assassinated students. He was terribly upset by their cynicism and negativism. Sara never mentioned this, although she was subjected to the same experiences.

While all student teachers have some apprehension about finding a job, it was interesting to watch these two struggle in different ways. Sara was energetic and tackled the problem aggressively by putting together a portfolio, signing up for every interview possible, sending resumes out to numerous places and dressing elegantly for interviews, job fairs, etc.

John rarely mentioned seeking a job. It was not addressed in his journal or in private conversations. He had the confidence that a job would happen. If he had to substitute for a while, that was acceptable. Although he never really voiced it, I felt that he assumed that if he substituted, and continued to talk to people he knew, he would get a job. He was not concerned about what kind of job, or where it would be. He just wanted to teach. Sara, on the other hand, calculated every variable, e.g., socio-economic status of students, number of preparations, age of school building, number of advanced placement courses.

Sara got a job in a very prestigious, well-paying school district. John is substituting. Both

are happy.

Summary

It is easy to say that any difference between traditional and non-traditional students is marginal and idiosyncratic. However, I continue to be convinced that there is some measurable difference that is worth investigating. Looking for it may lead to new revelations about student teaching and teacher preparation in general.

John, like others with whom I have dealt, recorded in his journal and repeated in conversations with me that he would do whatever it took to get his certification. I never heard that form Sara. He had that paranoia that brought me to this study. She did not. She had every confidence that obtaining certification was no problem.

As was found in the literature (Brag, 1995; Meloy, 1992) the relationship with cooperating teachers, as well as other faculty in the high school, was very positive and easily established by the non-traditional student. Sara was easily mistaken for a high school student. When I interviewed the cooperating teachers, they agreed that they typically built relationships with the student teachers who were closer to their age (approximately 40). The non-traditional student teacher is well aware of the incongruence between the trust and acceptance he/she receives from both faculty and students, and their insecurity in the role of student teaching and as novice in the school arena.

As one who is convinced that the skills of teaching and instruction are complicated tasks that are neither learned by osmosis, nor best left to trial and error, I am dedicated to the necessity for effective teacher education programs. However, I see that seguing into teaching from other professions is a different experience for individuals than entering the classroom as a young twenty-something man or woman.

There is enough evidence here to affirm my suspicions that student teaching is different for non-traditional students, enough so that it deserves further study and the consideration of teacher educators. Perhaps there are things we can do to smooth the transition from other professions into

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

the teaching profession. Perhaps the lessons to be learned analyzing the experiences of non-traditional students are ones that can teach us new ways of working with all student teachers.

On a broader scene, shortages in every area of education loom as the baby-boomers retire and school populations grow. Politicians, in the rush to provide, are considering various ways to alleviate the shortage problem, the least offensive of which is alternative certification. It is assumed that if women have raised children or men successfully commanded troops, they can instantly become effective teachers. They may, indeed, have such potential, but becoming a teacher is far more complicated than a mere career change. Every non-traditional student with which I have worked has affirmed that adjusting to the milieu of schooling was not as easy as thought, that teaching was far more complicated than they had thought. It is far more than just knowing the content.

Conclusion and Implications

Two factors were overwhelming germane to both the non-traditional and the traditional student teacher. Both conveyed their exhaustion. Both were amazed at how their cooperating teachers kept up with so much information. The record keeping was overwhelming. The red tape of bureaucracy, both at the university and within the public school system, as well as within the juvenile justice system, was staggering. In addition, in the focus group, it was agreed that the classroom management course was useless, when related to the reality the student teachers faced upon beginning their internship. This is supported in Bray's (1995) study.

Perhaps getting students into school systems earlier in their programs would help with this. Those observations, I suggest, should be guided, so that by the time they begin the student teaching experience, they have a reasonable understanding of the system's protocol, including, but not limited to procedures for reporting absences, student behavior problems, grading, and curriculum matters. If student teachers are more informed about the procedures, they can pay more attention to instruction once the student teaching experience begins.

If student teachers spend more time observing and working in the school setting, then teacher educators must reconsider the time spent on campus in education courses. For non-traditional students, I suggest Saturday classes and providing ways for them to test out of content courses. Financial problems sometimes prevent student teachers, especially older ones who are supporting families, from benefitting the way they should from their experience. In this study, John worked 10-12 hours days in a convenience store on weekends.

Performance assessment and portfolios hold the key to assessing just what it is individuals must do, or be able to do, to obtain certification. If a student can pass whatever exam is mandatory in their home state and can show competency via a video, and other data, e.g., lesson plans, of instructional skills, perhaps they should be given options that might involve paid internships. This is especially relevant to areas where we have the most shortages, e.g., foreign language.

The data on non-traditional students, in general, suggests that adults need to have more ownership in their programs. I suggest we let them be an active voice in designing their course of study, rather than a passive one who is simply told the courses to take, or hoops through which they must jump, to get their certification.

If some of these needs are addressed, perhaps we can abrogate the paranoia of non-traditional students by providing them with gradual doses of success and ownership in their destiny. As one student (age 43) said to me, "This is no dress rehearsal for us. We can't just try this for a few years and if it doesn't work, try something else."

Such a study as this should add to the body of research and observation that informs those of us who organize, design, and implement teacher preparation programs. I believe that I have learned that we are doing some things very well, e.g., preparation in content area. I am equally confident that I have learned that in their program of study there are some gaps, indeed some needs that are not being met, especially for the non-traditional student. If we are missing the boat with non-traditional students, we are probably failing in the same ares with traditional students.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

I believe in many areas of our lives we are moving toward more personalization. We can personalize programs in higher education, too. There are the possibilities that students might test out of some courses, such as the computer classes now mandatory in most teacher education programs. Non-traditional student can test out of content areas. Bridging the transition from student to teacher may be accomplished by getting students into meaningful involvement in schools at an earlier place in their programs.

Finally, being able to share with someone else is crucial. The two student teachers in this study admitted to me that they valued the time spent with me talking about their experiences. While some universities have weekly seminars, it is more difficult at smaller schools where there is no corps of graduate students. The power in group dynamics is immense and the need for interaction with others who are experiencing the same things is absolutely critical.

This year I am working with 30 non-traditional students who are involved in internships, i.e., they are teaching full time and coming to class at night. I admire their stamina and I am encouraged that we are attracting such dynamic people to teaching. Anecdotal evidence gathered via casual interviews and observations of group activities indicates that they share a great deal with the non-traditional students with whom I have worked. They fear failure. They are overwhelmed by paper work via bureaucracy. They are feeling the frustration and difficulty of being a student who is suddenly a teacher. They have great parental-like concern for students, are very competent in their content area, and are struggling with relationships with students and faculty. Most of all they are baffled with the issues of management, e.g., time management, discipline. Basically, in their programs they have had a lot of theory, but not much practice.

It has been suggested, and surely is believed, that any aged person can return to college. Any aged person can change professions. Age has little to do with the ability to be a successful teacher. We have welcomed the non-traditional student into our educational programs, because, theoretically, we believed she/he could function and thrive in the educational setting. These